

POLICY PAPER

JUNE 2018

Russian Neo-imperialism: Sources, genesis and consequences for the countries of South East Europe

Russian imperialism did not emerge in 2014, but it has existed for about three centuries. During the period of Putin's presidency, it substantially intensified, began to use aggressive tools of the hybrid type and acquired forms of neo-imperialism. The countries of South East Europe found themselves at the forefront of countering the Russian hybrid aggression, which has the same list of instruments, but for each country they are selected differentially to achieve the main goal - to set Russia's control over all countries of the region and to influence the rest of Europe by using them. The main ways of counteracting Russian neo-imperialism are to carry out internal transformations, first of all, reforms and fight against corruption in order to reduce the number of vulnerabilities that the Russian Federation uses or can use, as well as the consolidation of efforts of all countries of the region and Europe in the whole.¹

For centuries, being in different forms of the empire, Russia has followed the expansionary line of its foreign policy. The region of South East Europe has always been in the focus of this policy, starting from the conquest of Ukraine in XVII century until the current aggression against Ukraine and the interference in internal affairs of the Balkan and South Caucasus countries. The basis of this policy has always been the desire of the Kremlin to become the dominant in the European area, but not due to the internal development and bilateral and multilateral cooperation, but through expansion like both the involvement of a number of countries of South East Europe into Russian integration projects (Belarus, Armenia) and by the use of power tools (Georgia, Ukraine), as well as attempts to make some EU member states and candidates countries its vassals (Bulgaria, Serbia). Such methodology remains unchanged for years, only ways and tools have been changed.

1. Problematics of Russian neo-imperialism in the region of South East Europe

Today the current Russian neo-imperialism, being perfected for a long time, is the most dangerous, because it is implemented in concealed manner, under cover of declarations to "take care" of Russian-

¹ Prepared on the results of the international conference «Russian Neo-imperialism: Sources, genesis and consequences for the countries of South East Europe» (18 June 2018, Odesa, Ukraine).

speaking and / or Orthodox citizens, fraternal peoples, peacekeeping, implementation of economic and energy projects, etc. However, its purpose remains unchanged, it is the control over the region of South East Europe. That is why the open (military) phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine with the capture of Crimea and intervention in Donbas was waged.

Such policy of Russia does not give the countries of the region anything but destabilization and threats to their sovereignty. This requires the development of effective countermeasures and prevention mechanisms. Since Russia uses similar methods and tools, while adapting them to a specific situation, the countries of the region can and have to establish cooperation and coordinate measures to detect and counteract them. The ways to solve this problem were discussed at the international conference "Russian Neo-imperialism: Sources, genesis and consequences for the countries of South East Europe", held by the Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI" in partnership and with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Office in Ukraine, on June 18, 2018 in Odessa (Ukraine), which gathered experts from different countries of the region.²

As the President of the Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI" Mykhailo Gonchar underlined, the sub-regions of South East Europe, the Balkans, the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus, are a zone of constant efforts by the Russian Federation to destabilize Europe as a whole and the European Union, in particular. According to him, the essence of the neo-imperialist approach of Russia lies in actions from inside of the countries of the region by means of proxy-instruments and in promoting recognition of these countries by the EU as an area "in between", deprived of European identity, that creates the prerequisites for the further legalization of expansion by the RF of its influence in such a way.

The Head of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Office in Ukraine Gabriele Baumann said that according to numerous experts, Russian destabilisation policy is being directed not only on Ukraine but also on Southern Caucasus, the Balkans, the Black Sea region and the European Union. A recent manifestation of such a policy was the construction of a bridge across the Kerch Strait, the consequences of which can be very serious, as it is an obvious violation of international law and strengthening of Russian control in the Black Sea region.

The region of South East Europe needs increased attention and interaction, because, according to the Head of the International Programs of Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI" Vitalii Martyniuk, it looks like a certain mechanism that should unite all societies for stability, peace and prosperity. For the time being, there are numerous threats in the region that have significantly increased after the Russian occupation of Crimea and its invasion in Donbas in 2014.

2. Reasons and tools of Russia to expand its neo-imperial politics in South East Europe

Background of the Russian neo-imperialism is the same for all countries of South East Europe. However, this region is not a final goal for Russia. Thus, **Mykhailo Gonchar** stressed that its strategic **conception provides that the European Union has to become a high-tech appendage for Russia within its neo-imperialist project of Great Eurasia**. To reach this goal, among other, it is necessary that the countries of South East Europe would be under full control of the Russian Federation. One of the most important instruments of Russia to reach this goal is an energy based one. It was clearly defined in the Energy Strategy of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2003, as an instrument of conducting domestic and foreign policy and is being further developed in the current edition of the Strategy – "energy is an instrument for solving both national and global problems". Along with the fact that energy export revenues feed Russia's expansion, Russia uses energy projects to create hybrid threats to the European security, which are not perceived there as the threats. For example, the Nord Stream 2 is a highly toxic project for the EU that looks like a business project but will have destructive consequences for the European unity. Nord Stream AG, which implements this project, is registered in Switzerland. Russia uses this country for financial and economic expansion in the EU, because it is outside the jurisdiction of Brussels, but it is possible to implement the policy of the Russian Federation

² <https://geostrategy.org.ua/en/component/k2/item/1478-russian-neoimperialism>

from its territory to the whole Europe. Those, who control the flows of natural resources in combination with the control of financial flows generated by them through Switzerland, will have an impact on the EU institutions and key EU member states, which define the EU policy, emphasized the President of the Centre for Global Studies "Strategy XXI".

In general, as Mykhailo Gonchar summarized, the West is facing a defeat in a new "cold war", not even noticing when it has started. As Davit Shahnazaryan rightly pointed out, it was resolved in 2007 by the well-known speech of Putin at the Munich Security Conference. In June 2018, the G7 meeting in Canada showed signs of problems in the "collective West". The lack of a timely response to Russia's provocative behavior only encourages it to further aggressive actions. The societies of South East Europe should consolidate their efforts and create an expert network of early reaction in the region, which will prevent Russia from implementing its neo-imperialist policy.

Yury Fedorov, Russian Military-Political Expert, noted that Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine became only the first stage of the global strategy of the Russian Federation, targeting the EU and the international architecture. Russian neo-imperialism, which has public support in the Russian Federation, envisages bringing pro-Russian forces into power in the countries of South East Europe and creation of a belt of states of the region under the Russian protectorate for further Russian expansion in Europe. Moscow aspires to use separate countries of the region as a "Trojan horse" within the EU and NATO. After the aggression of the RF against Ukraine, an uncertainty about the effectiveness of the mechanism to defend NATO member states appeared in the countries of South East Europe. Therefore, in order to counter Russia's expansion, in addition to the NATO defence system, a regional security system with Ukraine as the key element should be established.

Chairman of the Center for Legal and Political Studies "Concord" (Armenia) **David Shahnazaryan** said that the EU, the US and the West as a whole had always underestimated the threat of the Russian imperialism, which had always been in Russia, as it has existed for around 300 years, but entered recently its active phase. Therefore, within its present borders, Russia will always be a threat to the European security. Russia needs instability guided by the Kremlin along the perimeter of its borders, which allows it to feel safe. At the same time, Russia does not want a global war, but wants to gain victories by means of intimidation, including nuclear weapons. Since Russia is not economically capable of becoming a world pole, it demonstrates readiness to use force and weapons to push the United States to return to the bipolar Washington-Moscow world. The peak of tension between Russia and the West, according to the expert, has already been achieved, and the recession will begin in the autumn of 2018, after the elections in the US.

David Shahnazaryan singled out such a phenomenon as the use of corruption by Russia for its hybrid war that was aimed at undermining the countries from inside, erosion of the "collective West" and became a huge threat to the European security similar to international terrorism. Signs of Russian corruption are observed in almost all European countries. It manifests itself in the financing of ultra-right and ultra-left parties in Europe, which cast liberal-democratic principles in doubt, is spread in political and journalistic circles. Russia uses corruption ties to keep the countries of South East Europe in its orbit. Against this backdrop, as the expert pointed out, Ukraine should move away from the bias of being a small nation, because it will play a decisive role in the security of Europe in the next 20-25 years.

In the same context, Bulgarian journalist and blogger **Ivo Indzheev** called Bulgaria an excellent example of the use of corruption by Russia, especially in the energy sector, because this country is very dependent on Russia in the oil, gas and nuclear energy sectors, and the prices on Russian gas for Bulgaria are much higher than for Germany. Even now, Russia continues to export corruption to Bulgaria, which, as a result, is the poorest country in the European Union and, at the same time, a peculiar "Trojan horse" in the EU. Bulgaria does not resist Russian aggression, as there is no political party in the country that would criticise Russia.

Another sign of the Russian neo-imperialism is violation of human rights by Russia that not always receives an adequate response from the international community. For example, according to the conclusions of the Expert of the Pylyp Orlyk Institute for Democracy **Natalya Belitser**, despite of Russia's massive violations of human rights in the occupied Crimea, attention of the international

community was shifted to the FIFA World Cup in Russia. Meanwhile, Russia continues to violate human rights, and the majority of cases are against the Crimean Tatars, since more than a half of the repressive actions concern their own public activists. To draw attention from this dangerous tendency, Russia has resorted to a peculiar line of defense to throw fake accusations of violating human rights against Ukraine. The only effective way to counter violation of human rights by Russia, on the Expert's opinion, is thorough fixation of such facts and activation of corresponding lawsuits against the Russian Federation in the international courts.

3. Negative consequences and threats of the Russian neo-imperialism

The Russian neo-imperialism has only negative consequences and threats to the countries of South East Europe, the main of which are: strengthening of Russia's military presence in the Black Sea region and its destabilization; blocking economic and other activities of Ukraine in the Sea of Azov; ousting the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian language and culture from Crimea; support and intensification of conflicts in the region; strengthening of energy dependence on the RF; destabilization of countries in the region by using pro-Russian forces and encouraging corruption there; strengthening of pro-Russian sentiments inside the EU through the use of existing and future member states; blurring of the international legal framework; undermining confidence in international organizations, which have to guarantee peace and security.

According to estimates of the former Commander of the Ukrainian Navy (2014-2016), Head of the Association of Veterans of the Naval Forces of Ukraine, Vice Admiral **Serhii Gayduk**, Russia's current activities in the Black Sea and Azov region are aimed at strengthening its own military presence by militarizing the Crimean Peninsula and isolating Ukraine from the sea. For this purpose, Russia uses the lack of delimitation and demarcation agreements on the Ukrainian-Russian border in the Sea of Azov, its control over the Kerch Strait, strengthening its military presence in Crimea and the Black Sea. It's too early to talk about the sea blockade of Ukraine, but the tendency of "creeping occupation" of the Ukrainian sea area is obvious. According to Serhii Gayduk, by using the actual number of forces and means of the Navy and border guards, Ukraine cannot prevent the growing presence of the RF at sea, and therefore it needs to quickly restore its naval component. This requires a systematic approach, definition of a strategy for restoring national sovereignty at sea, development of maritime policy and involvement of all economic, political, diplomatic and military resources of the country.

Yulia Tyshchenko, Head of the Democratic Processes Support Program, Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research, noted that another component of the militarization of Crimea is "militarization" of civilian life there that is imposing militaristic behavior, military clothing, symbols and traditions on the population. In addition, in Crimea, Russia spreads Russian narratives, culture and traditions to replace Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian ones.

The threat of Russian imperial policy towards Moldova, as National Security and Defence Expert from Moldova **Iurie Dominic** noted, is its support to Transnistria, the "fifth column" and corruption component in the state. However, Moldova made conclusions from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, introduced changes to its national security legislation, and took measures to counter Russian propaganda through imposing restrictions on the possession of television channels (no more than two) by one person and banning the broadcast of the TV channel "Russia 24".

In the Western Balkan region, Russia exercises influence through pro-Russian forces, propaganda and energy levers. According to Director of the Serbian - Euro-Atlantic Cooperation **Vencislav Bujic**, while having limited opportunities for influence, dictated by the country's pursuit towards the membership in the EU, Russia has skillfully used the energy sector in Serbia, posing its dominance in the oil and gas sectors. By entering the energy sector of the Balkan countries, Russia first demonstrates attractive conditions, but later sets its rules, raises energy prices and uses numerous pro-Russian forces to initiate internal protests at the right for Russia time. Russia wants Serbia to become a member of the EU as its satellite. In Serbia and other Western Balkan countries, there is not enough information on what is really happening in Ukraine. The Russian Federation uses this to spread its propaganda and create broad support for its policies in South East Europe.

Senior Specialist of the Center for International Studies of the Hennadii Udovenko Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine **Olena Snigyr** noted that Russia was moving forward very carefully and used only weaknesses, imposing an illusion to objects of aggression that nothing terrible happened and nothing changed. It also proficiently uses its privileges as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and other organisations, designed to guarantee security in Europe, in particular - the Council of Europe and the OSCE, for the implementation of its neo-imperialist policy in the world. Covering by the calls for peace and stability, Russia constantly violates the principles of these organizations. For Russia, it is important to maintain the visibility of compliance with the legal framework, and therefore it tries to act within their frames, where it is possible, or does everything to change these frameworks. The behavior of the Russian Federation shows that it will not stop in Crimea and Donbas and it is not ready to retreat, because the consolidation of the Russian society around the idea of a superpower requires such a behavior.

4. Ways of countering the Russian neo-imperialism in South East Europe

Above all, countering the Russian neo-imperialism is possible under the condition of consolidation and concerted actions of all countries of South East Europe. Taking into account the hybrid nature of the Russian aggression, the ways of counteraction should be determined at the national and international (regional) levels. That is why Director of the Center for International Studies at the Odessa Mechnikov National University **Volodymyr Dubovyk** noted the need for the countries of the region, the EU and NATO to more clearly define their regional policies in South East Europe not to allow Russia to use this vacuum for extension of its negative impact on the security situation in the region, including the use of military levers, energy weapon, propaganda, religious influences, populism and xenophobia, and the support of separate political forces in European countries.

In his turn, Leader of the program "Big Game" (Georgia) **Gela Vasadze** offered to use the anti-Russian consensus of the elites in the Post-Soviet countries to prevent Russia from transforming the region into a peculiar buffer in accordance with its idea of "Europe in between". Ukraine should become the centre of gravity for the Post-Soviet space and create an alternative to the "Russkiy mir", proposed by Moscow. The Georgian expert also called on experts and journalists from the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as Turkey, Iran and the Central Asian states, which had many common issues, to join in counteracting Russian imperialism. In South East Europe, in his opinion, it is necessary to create permanent information clusters.

The Director of the Centre for Security Studies (Bosnia and Herzegovina) **Denis Hadzovic** noted that Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, through its entity - the Republika Srpska, were the most vulnerable to Russian influence among the countries of the Western Balkans, in which Moscow uses Slavic and religious unity as well as military support. As assistance the Russian Federation transferred 6 military planes MiG-29, 30 tanks and 30 armoured vehicles to Serbia. On his opinion, in order to hinder the strengthening of such Russian influence, the European Union must harder implement the decision of the EU - Western Balkans Summit, held in 2003 in Thessaloniki, which defined the EU membership for all the countries of the region.

According to Deputy Chief of Staff of the Navy Command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on Euro-Atlantic Integration **Andrii Ryzhenko**, in order to prevent Russia's domination in the Black Sea, the important task is to strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities at sea, which should enhance security in the Black Sea region. Otherwise, Russia will continue to increase its military presence in Crimea. Even now, in the region, there are seven Russian submarines equipped with rocket systems "Kalibr" capable of using nuclear weapons, whose radius of damage reaches the Scandinavian countries, the Great Britain, Spain and North Africa. If the Russian military presence in the Black Sea is not balanced, Russia will threaten all the countries of Europe and the Mediterranean.

Considering Russia's systemic actions aimed at capturing the Sea of Azov under its control, to which the construction of the Kerch Bridge facilitates, on the opinion of Andrii Ryzhenko, Ukraine should abandon its status of the "internal sea" of Ukraine and Russia that is not in line with the Convention on the Law of the Sea and it is dangerous for the national security of Ukraine. At the same time, Ukraine

should create naval bases on the Sea of Azov, building up protection of Azov territories. In general, this will increase the balance of power and, accordingly, security in the region.

According to **Alexander Khara**, Foreign policy and security expert, Deputy Chair of the Black Sea Institute of Strategic Studies, countering to the Russian neo-imperialism goes through internal transformation, reforms, economic development and fight against corruption in all countries of South East Europe. At the regional level, it is worth to develop public and expert diplomacy and intensify formats of interstate cooperation, which already exists in the region. At the same time, the European Union, which does not want to compete with Russia for the countries of South East Europe, should become the center of gravity for the whole region. Indeed, if the EU would have its well-defined regional policy, it could be able to withstand Russia, which has no soft power and therefore nothing to offer to South East European countries, except destabilization.

5. Conclusions and recommendations on counteraction to the Russian neo-imperialism in South East Europe

South East Europe is a zone of constant aggressive efforts by the Russian Federation. The region is a prime area for the influence of Russian neo-imperialism, although Russia's policy of destabilization extends not only to Ukraine, the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus or the Balkans, but also to the European Union. The strategic conception of the Russian Federation is to bring South East European countries under its full control, and to rearrange the European Union into a high-tech appendage of primary producing Russia. Therefore, Moscow actively promotes the recognition of the countries of the region as an "in between" area that creates the preconditions for Russia to spread its influence on them. At the same time, Russia works from inside of each country of the region. Therefore, the region of South East Europe needs more attention and interaction, because peace and security of whole Europe depends on its stability.

Characteristic features and sources of the Russian neo-imperialism are the following:

- The policy of imperialism, inherent in Russia for the last 300 years, has now re-entered its active phase, and therefore Russia is currently a source of danger for Europe;
- Support for neo-imperialist policy of Russia by the Russian society is both a source and a consolidating goal of the Kremlin;
- Russia seeks to become a world pole and, for this purpose, is able to use military, energy and humanitarian levers, in particular Slavic and Orthodox identity;
- Military support to certain countries of the region, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Armenia and Serbia, is used by Russia to strengthen its presence and influence on these countries;
- Along the perimeter of its borders, Russia creates a belt of instability, guided by the Kremlin, that allows it to feel safe, self-isolating and create a springboard for further Russian expansion in Europe;
- Energy for Russia is a source of power for expansion and an instrument for solving its national and global problems;
- The lack of timely response of the international community to the provocative actions of Russia is being perceived as an incentive for further aggression;
- Russian neo-imperialism is accompanied by Russia's neglection and violation of human rights that the Kremlin attempts to mask under fake accusations against a victim's country, in particular Ukraine.

Russian neo-imperialism carries **destructive consequences and threats** to the countries of South East Europe, the main of which are:

- Threats of hybrid nature are especially dangerous because the victim country does not perceive them as a threat, since it imposes an illusion that nothing fatal happens;
- The strengthening of the Russian military presence and the expansion of illegal economic activity in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov regions violates the regional balance of power and threatens regional stability;

- Russia supports and raises armed conflicts in the region, hiding itself behind the role of a peacekeeper, mediator or attorney at law;
- Bringing of pro-Russian corrupt forces to power in South East Europe, backed up by propaganda campaigns, threatens the stability of these countries and the region as a whole;
- Corruption has become one of the key instruments for Russia to blow up the countries of the region from inside and decay the "collective West", and it is a kind of threat similar to international terrorism;
- The pro-Russian course of separate countries of South East Europe transforms them into a "Trojan horse" inside the EU and NATO that promotes strengthening of pro-Russian moods within these organizations and undermines the Euro-Atlantic unity;
- The lack of determination of the EU and NATO in counteracting Russia's aggression has given rise of uncertainty concerning effectiveness of the mechanisms of protection of their member countries and, accordingly, strengthened the euro-skepticism;
- The energy policy of the Russian Federation is aimed at strengthening energy dependence of the countries of the region on Russia;
- The aggressive behavior of Russia in Crimea is aimed at displacement and marginalization of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian populations of the peninsula;
- The use of international organizations by Russia to achieve its aggressive goals leads to blurring of the international legal frameworks and undermines the credibility of international organizations, designed to guarantee peace and security, such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

In order to counter Russia's neo-imperialism in South East Europe, **it is advisable to take the following steps:**

1. By the countries of the region:

- 1.1. Consolidate the efforts of all countries in South East Europe and achieve their concerted actions at the national and international levels.
- 1.2. Identify the threats that come from inside the countries, focusing on internal transformations, reforms, economic development and the fight against corruption in order to reduce the number of weaknesses that Russia can use.
- 1.3. Develop public and expert diplomacy at the regional level and intensify the existing interstate cooperation formats in the region.
- 1.4. Create a regional early-warning expert network for timely detection of hybrid threats that would prevent Russia from implementing its neo-imperialist policy.
- 1.5. Use anti-Russian consensus of the elites of the post-Soviet countries to prevent Russia from transforming the region into a peculiar buffer in accordance with its idea of "Europe in between".
- 1.6. Establish permanent information clusters in South East Europe with the participation of experts and journalists from the Eastern Partnership countries, Turkey, Iran and the countries of Central Asia, which have many common points of contact.
- 1.7. Strengthen information campaigns in the countries of the Western Balkans in order to truly highlight events in Ukraine to prevent Russia from spreading propaganda and creating broad support for Russian policy in South East Europe.
- 1.8. Record thoroughly the facts of violation of human rights by Russia and increase the submission of relevant lawsuits to international courts.

2. By Ukraine:

- 2.1. Get free from the bias of being a small nation, because it is the only state that can become the regional center of gravity for the post-Soviet area and create an alternative to the "Russian world", which is offered by Moscow. In the next 20-25 years, Ukraine must play a decisive role in the security of Europe.

2.2. Make efforts to quickly restore its naval component of defense that requires a systematic approach, definition of a strategy for restoring national sovereignty at sea, development of maritime policy and involvement of all economic, political, diplomatic and military resources of the country.

2.3. Abandon the status of the "internal sea" of Ukraine and Russia for the Sea of Azov, which does not comply with the Convention on the Law of the Sea and is dangerous for the national security of Ukraine.

3. By the European Union and NATO:

3.1. Determine directions of its regional policy in South East Europe not to allow Russia to use this vacuum to prolong its negative impact on the security situation in the region.

3.2. To the European Union - to become the center of gravity for the whole region of South East Europe, because it is able to withstand Russia, which can offer nothing to the countries of the region, except destabilization.

3.3. To the European Union - to implement more resolutely the decisions of the EU - the Western Balkans Summit of 2003, which defined the EU membership for all the countries of the region.

3.4. Create a regional security system with Ukraine as the core basis and with the involvement of the Alliance's partners, in addition to the NATO security system.

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